

DOWNTOWN

EXISTING LAND USE

Downtown includes those areas historically zoned downtown commercial and central residential and is a vibrant place with retail shops and restaurants already in place. Downtown Blacksburg is the heart of the community, encompassing the original "Sixteen Squares" of historic Blacksburg. Pedestrian oriented commercial and office uses prevail along Main Street between Miller and Clay Streets to Prices Fork Road. Residential areas extend west towards the university, and east towards Wharton Street. The center of civic activity is in the downtown area, where Town government services are located, and many places of worship are sited. Twenty percent of the land area in this sector is dedicated to public and semi-public uses, compared with the town average of two percent. Students have found housing in this area to be attractive because of its proximity to campus. A number of Greek organizations reside in and own houses along Roanoke Street, and several are located north of Turner Street.

Unique Characteristics

Downtown includes the site of the original "Sixteen Squares" of Town. This historic area contains a number of older homes and structures. There is a strong community sentiment for preservation of historic structures that remain, as they provide a significant contribution to the character of the area and of the community. The Blacksburg Historic Overlay District is an attempt to preserve the heritage of this area and to help provide incentives to restore the historic fabric of Town.

The university is in close proximity. As a result, the area sees a high proportion of students and student related automobile traffic. In addition, the university offers performing and visual art exhibits in facilities near the downtown, including Squires Student Center and the Armory Building. Their plan for a creative arts center adjacent to Henderson Lawn with a parking structure near Squires is strongly supported by the town. These projects enliven the downtown area, but increase the demand for parking. The town may participate with Virginia Tech on the planning and construction of a parking facility in the downtown area.

The appearance of the downtown is a defining feature of the area. The use of brick pavers, signs, benches, hanging baskets, and trees have created a unique character and attractive appearance. The

attention to these design features has helped to create an inviting environment, and one which merchants, shoppers, and residents alike take pride in. The Downtown Master Plan will build on these physical improvements to provide a stronger town center that is pedestrian oriented, economically diverse, and fundamentally vital.

Downtown is a mix of diverse cultures and the center for townwide activities such as parades, races, and civic activity. Special events such as the summer concert series and Steppin' Out have been successful in bringing people out and contribute to the life of the town. The majority of municipal offices are located in this area, including the Post Office, Municipal Building, Police Department, WTOB Channel 2, and the Montgomery-Floyd Regional Library. In addition, there is a concentration of community worship centers in the area.

Trails and open space play a significant role in the aesthetic charm and pedestrian orientation of the downtown. The Huckleberry Trail enters the downtown area at the public library, then converts into the Bicentennial Trail in Bicentennial Square. The open space adjacent to the police station, Five Chimneys, and the Thomas Connor House are a pedestrian gateway as the trail winds its way to College Avenue. The Central Blacksburg Greenway will extend from College Avenue, through University property, and across Main Street proceeding east to the Municipal Park and Blacksburg High School. The middle school property also enhances the primary gateway into downtown Blacksburg.

The earliest Town spring, Spout Spring, is located in downtown. This spring feeds into Stroubles Creek, which lies buried under much of the downtown area, including the university campus. Opportunities to unbury this environmental asset should be explored to the east and west of the immediate downtown area, and maybe in the central core in future years if possible.

Critical Issues

Parking quality and quantity has long been a concern in the area. Available space is attractive not only to shoppers, but also to shop employees and to students attending class on the nearby campus. Parking availability affects potential customer base, and parking lot appearance affects the character of the area. Parking nodes carefully tucked in and around the area can offer a variety of parking opportunities while minimizing the visual impact. The Downtown Master Plan's parking recommendations should be a high priority for implementation.

There is a need to be able to accommodate places of worship. This area has a high concentration of religious uses including many very old and very large church buildings and the town's only synagogue. Provisions must be made to ensure that they can expand facilities in response to changing needs in the community without infringing on the residential nature of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown. These civic institutions provide a critical buffer between the downtown commercial center and the residential neighborhoods to the east of downtown.

Traffic flow through downtown is a concern. North/south traffic corridors are limited by the university to the west, and by the old middle school property and residential streets to the east. Main Street provides the only major north/south artery through this area. During peak hours or events, traffic backs up creating an overflow onto residential streets. Speeding and other traffic violations are problematic throughout the day and make the downtown less pedestrian friendly. Developing and implementing a traffic calming strategy for the downtown area is necessary to enhance the pedestrian oriented atmosphere.

The community has expressed a strong desire to preserve existing structures of historic significance. This includes many structures within the historic "Sixteen Squares", which defines the original town boundaries. A number of contributing historic structures continue to stand in this area and others. Preservation of the most significant of these is a critical factor in protecting the character of the town. The Blacksburg Historic Overlay District should not be expanded or altered, however, until or unless positive results are documented.

The town's primary retail base has vacated the downtown area and downtown is becoming increasingly "student dominated." Many of Blacksburg's non-student population has a perception that downtown commercial establishments only serve student needs. In addition a student oriented downtown lacks the diversity for commercial uses to attract a diversity of residents to the downtown.

There is a desire to preserve single-family residential character while incorporating limited commercial uses. The residential areas surrounding the downtown have felt the pressure of commercial growth for many years. As the town has grown, these areas have become more and more the "heart of the community." There is a desire to expand limited commercial enterprises beyond current zoning lines, but in a fashion maintaining the desirability and character of the residential areas. Special use permits in this area should be closely scrutinized to ensure the historic, pedestrian nature of the area is preserved or enhanced and not undermined. Many permanent

residents have a perception that downtown is not a desirable residential location.

The town infrastructure has a limited capacity. Water and sewer lines in this area were constructed with a limited capacity based on anticipated development. Improvements to these systems would be very disruptive and costly in the urban environment. These limitations may limit the intensity with which the downtown area can be further developed.

The future of Greek housing in the area will be limited. As fraternity and sorority uses cease along Roanoke Street and throughout Town or relocate onto campus, these non-conforming structures should be converted either to single family or small-scale commercial uses. The special use permit process could play a valuable role in integrating a mixed-use pattern of development along the Roanoke Street corridor. These properties, whether they remain as Greek housing or otherwise, need significant upgrades and facade improvements in order to meet current building codes and local historic district guidelines. Tax credits are available through federal and state programs to help offset up to 45% of the cost of rehabilitation. No new Greek housing uses are allowed off-campus by right.

The growth of commercial offerings on campus is a concern to downtown merchants. The university allows food vendors on campus in certain areas and provides catering services for on-campus functions through their Culinary Services Division and Donaldson Brown Center. These services are state operated and may provide requested services to other departments for university-related functions, which is a concern to some local business owners. Local merchants encourage the university to use local services, in addition to their own, to better promote the positive and symbiotic relationship that exists between the university and town businesses.

There is strong community support for the retention of open space and greenway areas. The downtown area has a strong pedestrian orientation. Open space and greenway connections provide visual and physical resting points, enhancing the aesthetic experience, and making the area more desirable in general. These downtown greenway connections should continue into the adjacent residential neighborhoods to better connect them to downtown. Streams should be enhanced and un-piped whenever feasible such as between the Spout Spring and the downtown core. Henderson Lawn, Bennett Hill (the Wong property), the middle school property, Thomas-Connor House, Five Chimneys, and other valuable open spaces in the downtown area contribute to the beauty and charm of the town. These

spaces should be enhanced and protected in order to preserve Blacksburg's natural and historic character.

The Virginia Tech Campus Master Plan identifies properties for acquisition in the downtown area. These include the block of properties along Roanoke Street across from the Architecture Annex, the group of properties between Washington Street, Otey Street, Kent Street, and Wall Street, and the block bounded by Washington Street, Kent Street and the university tennis courts. Also, the remaining properties in the Barger Street area including the Burger King, Sub Station, and McDonalds retail sites, but not extending to the Main Street frontage. Acquisition of these sites by the university would diminish the amount of commercial land available in the downtown area, and extend its presence further into the community, thereby changing the complexion of the downtown area. Virginia Tech is strongly encouraged to work with the town and to abide by the principles set forth in the Downtown Master Plan. The university's 2002-2007 Strategic Plan and upcoming master plan revisions could reflect the same values that are encouraged in the Downtown Master Plan to the benefit of both the university and the town.

Growth of the Virginia Tech office uses off-campus has been a trend over the past two decades. This growth has provided opportunities for the use of under utilized commercial space and for the conversion of residential sites to low intensity office uses, but has also limited the town's ability to attract retailers into Town. As the university discontinues its policy of leasing off-campus space in an attempt to reduce costs, these office buildings become vacant. Conversion of these vacated office spaces to retail and other commercial uses is a high priority for the town.

Neighborhoods

The Downtown sector is a diverse town center. There are currently three neighborhood planning areas in this sector. These neighborhoods vary greatly in their composition of uses, occupants, and cultural mix. This diversity is critical to the unique nature of Blacksburg's downtown but also causes significant conflicts between traditional residential and college lifestyles. The Blacksburg Historic District overlays most of the Downtown and Downtown Eastside neighborhoods.

Downtown

The Downtown neighborhood is the central business district of Town and the center of the Downtown sector. This neighborhood is served by several major roads including Main Street, Roanoke Street, Draper Road, College Avenue, and Price's Fork Road. This neighborhood has

a mix of residential and commercial uses, but is heavily oriented towards commercial.

The presence of Virginia Tech to the immediate west of this neighborhood is one of the central reasons behind Blacksburg's thriving downtown. The "captured" customer base of almost 9,000 on-campus students keeps the downtown vibrant and full of pedestrian traffic. Unfortunately, since Main Street is the only north/south corridor through Town, the close presence of the university also exacerbates vehicular traffic congestion.

Critical Neighborhood Issues

- ◆ Implementing the Downtown Master Plan and improving pedestrian safety and access throughout downtown and to the university is a major issue. This includes sidewalk improvements and expansion, bikeways, appropriate street signage and lighting, coordinated furniture such as benches, recycling and trash receptacles, and public spaces for gathering and entertainment. Strengthening the economic diversity and architectural integrity of the area and elevating the pedestrian above the automobile are primary goals. The Downtown Master Plan's land use recommendations are integrated into this chapter's "Special Considerations." Other master plan considerations are discussed throughout this comprehensive plan, particularly in the *Community Design*, *Community Facilities*, *Transportation*, and *Economic Development* chapters.
- ◆ Refuse collection and recycling are challenges for downtown businesses. Cleaning up alleyways while providing for centralized pick-up locations is a top priority for improving the aesthetic appearance of the area. This issue will demand the cooperation of all businesses in the downtown.
- ◆ Calming traffic through this primary north/south route is another challenge that relates directly to pedestrian safety and how visitors to downtown will perceive the area.
- ◆ Creating residential enclaves throughout the downtown is another key to a vibrant town center. Above ground condominiums with commercial below is encouraged. Offices may be a better second floor use above bar establishments that have late night hours but milder day activities.
- ◆ Stabilizing the zoning and establishing a clear development process is critical for attracting new development and rehabilitation into the central business district.

- ◆ The mixed-use area west of Draper Road contains many historically significant structures that are not included in the Blacksburg Historic Overlay District. These structures contribute to the architectural integrity of the town and downtown area. The Planning Commission should consider referring Special Use Permits in this area to the Historic / Design Review Board for an advisory review to provide commissioners with additional information when considering such permits.

Downtown Eastside

This neighborhood lies to the east of downtown and contains a mixture of civic, residential, and professional office uses. There are many lifestyle issues between the college residents and families in this neighborhood. Pedestrian traffic is often heavy during the late night hours, particularly from Thursday through Sunday. Litter, noise, vandalism, and parking are some of the more prominent challenges.

Critical Neighborhood Issues

- ◆ Occupancy of dwellings is a major issue in this neighborhood. There are legally non-conforming Greek houses that contain many more than the normal three unrelated individuals or two unrelated persons plus a family. Also, there are many illegally occupied dwellings that violate this Town ordinance. Rental properties in this area are not currently subject to the town's Rental Permitting program. Landlords do not have to register their rental properties and list the number of tenants with the town. This does not permit over-occupancy of dwellings, but it does make it difficult for the town to enforce.
- ◆ Property maintenance is another major challenge in this area. Greek houses are encouraged to maintain their properties to the best extent possible. Interior furniture is inappropriate on porches or other exterior portions of properties. Trash containers and loose debris is also inappropriate in yards and along roadways. Additionally, as properties convert to commercial uses there are many tax credit programs available to help rehabilitate structures and restore their historic character.
- ◆ Conversion of residential properties to commercial uses is a difficult issue that concerns neighborhood residents. Careful monitoring of the effects of the historic overlay district to properties within this residential area and permitting "special uses" only when the use would add to the character of the area are critical land use tools that can either protect or erode the residential nature of the neighborhood.

- ◆ Losing the “Old Town” identity of the area, providing adequate pedestrian space with appropriately located parking, and balancing the needs of the long established civic use of places of worship in the area are closely related challenges. As congregations expand, their structural and parking needs also grow. The need for facility expansion can have a detrimental impact to the aesthetics of adjacent areas with the conversion of land use from residential/commercial to parking/civic. If these needed facilities maintain an appropriate scale, address the pedestrian and parking challenges, and preserve or enhance the character of the larger community, then their location and design may benefit the neighborhood.
- ◆ The general appearance of the area is also a concern to residents. The burial of utility lines, expansion of landscaping from the downtown into the adjacent neighborhoods, more bicycle or foot police patrols, and routine litter pick-up and street sweeping are all needed to help improve and preserve the aesthetic appeal of the neighborhood.

Houston-Harrell

This neighborhood lays to the southwest of downtown a short walk down the Bicentennial Greenway across the Huckleberry Trail from the Miller Southside neighborhood. This area is in distress and has the lowest owner occupancy of any neighborhood in Town. All of the challenges that are present in Downtown Eastside are applicable here except there are few voices demanding change and improvement. This area has many concerns that will not be easily addressed by the town.

Critical Neighborhood Issues

- ◆ This area has no formal or informal representative group to advocate neighborhood issues. There is no one person or group of persons for the town to communicate with to address concerns. No core group of individuals has volunteered to represent this area. The population is transient by nature and almost exclusively consists of college students.
- ◆ This neighborhood is in decline and does not meet many Town building and zoning standards. The high rate of absentee ownership makes enforcement of these codes and standards difficult, if not impossible. There is no apparent sense of ownership present in the area from either the tenants or the owners.
- ◆ The area is currently zoned for medium/high density residential land use (RM-27). The university has expressed an interest in expanding the main campus eastward. The town has reclassified

the area as a Transitional Residential land use for additional academic buildings, limited (20 bedrooms or less per acre) on-campus residential housing, or other university-related uses that may be appropriate and do not adversely impact the adjacent low-density residential neighborhood. Effectively, the town would encourage Virginia Tech, or other interested parties, to make the significant infrastructure improvements necessary to revitalize the neighborhood and to provide safer, more appropriate housing in this area. The town is not interested in displacing hundreds or thousands of off-campus students without acceptable re-accommodation either on-campus or to other off-campus locations.

- ◆ An interested, motivated leader or group must emerge from this area in order to affect the type of fundamental infrastructure improvements necessary to revitalize the neighborhood. The noise pollution impacts on the adjacent Miller Southside neighborhood are already significant. Public safety is a major concern with only one primary access from Harrell Street, narrow streets with inadequate parking, and dangerous traffic conditions during peak events such as major social gatherings and university events. Emergency vehicles would be unable to effectively respond during such times.

VISION

Downtown Blacksburg is the heart of Town. It is the geographic and cultural center, and historic center of commerce and business. Downtown gives Blacksburg its identity as a college town. It reflects Blacksburg's past in its shops and houses and by establishing the cultural center of the community. As it includes the town's central business district, it anchors the rest of Town with pedestrian scale buildings, streets, sidewalks, and landscaping. Close proximity to the Virginia Tech campus adds to the vitality of the area.

The core of the downtown area exudes the vitality of interaction of people and activities. The small town scale and character is apparent by the strong pedestrian orientation and emphasis on historic character, walking paths, and landscaping. Commercial opportunities include a diversity of specialty retail, services, cultural/recreation/entertainment activities, and public functions.

The surrounding neighborhoods include a dynamic mix of uses linked by a common historic residential character. The western area includes a mix of single-family homes and student apartments, galleries, artist studios, bed and breakfast establishments, specialty shops, and small-scale office and institutional uses within existing houses.

The eastern area is also an eclectic mix of primarily residential uses. Historic structures are carefully renovated and new construction maintains and reinforces the historic fabric of the area. The Roanoke Street area serves as a tree lined corridor and focal point for the eastern entrance into Town with its landscaping and renovated structures.

Special Considerations

All elements of [Rediscovering the Heart of Blacksburg](#), the Downtown Master Plan, are discussed thoroughly in the *Community Design*, *Economic Development*, *Transportation*, and *Community Facilities* chapters of this comprehensive plan and support, but are not limited to, the following recommendations:

- ◆ Historic structures are retained and new construction is designed to be in keeping with the historic character of surrounding areas, and in conformance with the Blacksburg Historic District Guidelines.
- ◆ Virginia Tech campus highlights a primary gateway entrance to the university at the Mall, enriching and enlivening the downtown area. Their Campus Master Plan should be seamlessly integrated with the Downtown Master Plan.
- ◆ Construct gateway enhancements into the downtown area such as at the Clay-Main Street and Main Street-Prices Fork intersections. A roundabout would be an attractive method for calming traffic as it enters the downtown area at the Mall entrance. Wilson Avenue could be extended to Main Street at the intersection providing for multi-directional ingress and egress for the downtown and university.
- ◆ Henderson Lawn, the town's central plaza, is the focus for festivals, crafts, and other public and commercial functions. Virginia Tech is planning a creative arts center to be located just north of the lawn, adding a cultural dimension to this entrance into downtown and the university. Work with Virginia Tech to facilitate construction of the creative arts center with an exhibition facility to showcase the downtown as a substantial arts and cultural node.
- ◆ A greenway extends from Bicentennial Square next to the Police Station into the downtown, across Henderson Lawn, extending to the Bennett Hill neighborhood. This pathway will eventually connect with the Municipal Park and includes community spaces and parks with shelters, landscaping, signage, and lighting where appropriate.

- ◆ Places of worship are shown on the future land use map in their 2001 locations, because they are important anchors in a neighborhood and should be retained. They are an appropriate use in most neighborhoods when developed at a scale consistent with the surrounding community, as allowed by special use permit. The town does not wish to limit future locations of places of worship to the indicated map areas.
- ◆ Specialty shops, arts and crafts, upscale restaurants and cafes, condominiums, and commercial/business enterprises are concentrated in the Downtown Commercial area and provide vitality.
- ◆ The downtown area includes a significant number of residents located in studios and lofts. This residential element adds life at all hours of the day to the center of Town. New structured parking facilities should incorporate residential dwellings along the front of the structure. In addition new downtown development should incorporate residential uses.
- ◆ Building heights and yard requirements are limited in order to protect the small town architectural character and scale. Facade improvements to the front, side, and rear of stores will reinforce the historic character and pedestrian nature of the area, and improve the downtown's overall appearance. A façade grant program should be investigated for implementation.
- ◆ Design standards and continuity of landscaped public space, signage, and street furniture throughout the sector unify the area.
- ◆ Public off-street parking on the periphery of the district, and on underutilized parcels within the district, is provided through joint public-private parking developments with the university, places of worship, and private businesses. Parking is heavily landscaped to enhance the appearance of the district while providing a needed resource. Parking areas developed as part of a commercial venture are located behind the structure and are well landscaped.
- ◆ Roanoke Street is a main entrance to a pedestrian oriented downtown, and contains an architecturally diverse and mixed use of properties. Amenities in the Roanoke Street area should encourage public use creating a heightened need to provide sidewalks along both sides of Roanoke Street along with appropriate lighting and street furnishings.
- ◆ Giles Road should be extended from North Main Street to connect with Turner Street as recommended in the Downtown Master Plan.

- ◆ The small town architectural character and scale of the area west of Draper Road is preserved discouraging multi-unit uses. The scale and character of the predominately residential uses of the district and the remaining historic or architecturally significant properties are preserved.
- ◆ Planned commercial and residential development is located in the “New Town” area, flanking Turner and Barger Streets, incorporating unifying site design elements such as landscaping, buffered parking, and architectural features consistent with the surrounding area.
- ◆ Create a cohesive government campus along Main Street and Draper Road in a park plaza design centered around town hall, the police station, and library that contain unifying elements.
- ◆ Residential infill in the downtown area should be encouraged as recommended in the Downtown Master Plan. Many vacant or underutilized sites are either developable or in need of rehabilitation, and prime locations for new dwelling units. The consolidation of properties in the Houston-Harrell neighborhood is encouraged to transition this area to better serve the university and town’s interests.
- ◆ New lodging facilities should be encouraged downtown. The closing of the Donaldson Brown Hotel / Conference Center will cause a lack of lodging facilities in downtown Blacksburg.
- ◆ The middle school property is the southern anchor of the downtown area. This space must be fully utilized for civic-oriented functions, such as continued primary or secondary educational use, in order to continue to serve as a central space for the community to gather and interact. The town needs to explore and support partnering opportunities to continue educational uses in this facility and work closely with the county and school system to maximize the use of this vital community asset. The Downtown Master Plan is an excellent resource to plan and facilitate the future use of the property.

Changes from Existing Land Use Map

- The pedestrian oriented commercial area is expanded to encompass the places of worship along Church Street, extending half a block to Penn Street. This delineation allows for conforming modifications to the places of worship and expansion of office uses, while maintaining the residential character of surrounding streets.
- Downtown Eastside is designated as mixed use or transitional residential, allowing up to 10 dwelling units per acre. Roanoke Street serves as a tree lined corridor and focal point for the district with its landscaping and renovated structures.
- Civic activities are designated in the area where the municipal complex and library are located. Additionally, the designation is extended to include property up to Main Street and Miller Street, as well as directly across Main Street.
- The residential area generally to the west of Main Street, extending to the campus, is designated as mixed use. This area contains small-scale office and institutional use, tourist homes, bed and breakfast, studios, galleries, crafts, and specialty shops, primarily focused within existing structures. A visually attractive pedestrian atmosphere and environment exists.
- The Houston-Harrell neighborhood is designated as Transitional Residential use for academic buildings, transitional residential housing (20 bedrooms or less per acre), or other university-related uses that may be appropriate and do not adversely impact the adjacent low-density residential neighborhood. This area needs significant infrastructure and public safety improvements including a secondary access. Virginia Tech, or associated private interests, may be the best steward of this area since its main population is student oriented.